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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0979
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0892
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000133

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SUBJECT: ELECTION MONITORING REPORT CITES VIOLATIONS,
DEFENDS OUTCOMES, IN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary

¶1. (C) The NGO Joint Election Monitoring Committee (JEMC) issued its report February 10 on the recent parliamentary elections. The report does not clearly acknowledge that the elections were free and fair and enumerates many violations of the election law. However, it also states that the Committee had uncovered no tangible evidence of the government rigging election outcomes, despite many accusations. Spokespersons said Bahrain's electoral constituencies were not drawn in accordance with the principle of "one man, one vote," and the use of general polling stations, where any eligible voter could cast a ballot, was criticized. However, the Committee judged that election outcomes would not have been different had the general centers been abolished. Opposition political societies expressed their dissatisfaction with the report, in particular the assertion that the general centers had no impact on election results. JEMC members had signaled their views for some time, and there were no surprises in the report. The Committee appears to have set the bar very high on what constitutes evidence of government intervention, perhaps hoping that a more positive report would encourage the government to implement its recommendations before the next elections in 2010. End Summary.

Many Violations, But No Evidence of Rigging

¶2. (SBU) The Joint Election Monitoring Committee, composed of the (MEPI-funded) Bahrain Transparency Society (BTS) and Bahrain Human Rights Society (BHRS), issued its report on the late November/early December parliamentary elections on February 10. At a press conference for the report release, BTS President Jassim Al Ajmi and BHRS Secretary General Sabeeka Al Najjar said that the report enumerates many violations of Bahrain's election law by candidates and election officials and makes 32 recommendations for improving the next round of elections, in 2010. The report does not clearly acknowledge that the elections were free and fair but, with regard to the many accusations of government rigging of election outcomes, Al Ajmi said that the JEMC had

uncovered no tangible evidence supporting the allegations. He denied that the Committee had come under pressure from the government to issue a favorable report.

Constituencies, General Stations Problematic

13. (SBU) Al Najjar identified the large differences in the size of electoral districts as a fundamental problem not in accordance with the principle of "one man, one vote." She pointed out that, according to official statistics, there were 1,175 eligible voters in the fifth constituency of the Southern Governorate while there were 15,449 eligible voters in the first district of the Northern Governorate. "This means," she said, "that the ballot of a voter in the fifth constituency of the South Governorate is the equivalent of 13.15 votes in the first constituency of the Northern Governorate."

14. (SBU) The report is critical of the ten general polling stations, at which voters registered in any district could vote. It acknowledges that several political societies and independent candidates had sent petitions to the Supreme Election Committee and the Minister of Justice requesting that the general polling stations not be used. It also recognizes that many candidates alleged that the government used the general stations to rig outcomes. "We do not have tangible evidence" that this happened, Al Ajmi said, and he asserted that getting rid of these centers would not have changed the outcome of any races. However, in order to promote transparency and public trust, the report recommends that the general stations be eliminated.

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Broad Recommendations to Improve 2010 Elections

15. (SBU) Of the report's 32 formal recommendations, changing the constituencies and closing the general polling centers attracted the most attention. Other recommendations include:

- developing a new law covering elections, to supersede the 2002 law and its 2006 revisions;
- forming an independent election commission;
- providing detailed voter lists to candidates;
- allowing candidates to stand for election in any district, regardless of where they live;
- drafting a campaign finance law;
- permitting international organizations to monitor elections; and
- empowering the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and the Sunni and Shia religious endowments to prevent candidates from using mosques for political campaigns.

16. (SBU) All six of the country's daily Arabic newspapers covered the JEMC report and the press conference factually, drawing heavily from Al Ajmi and Al Najjar's comments. However, the two newspapers closest to the government, Al Watan and Akhbar Al Khaleej, both ran headlines claiming the elections were free and fair, a characterization not substantiated in the report or by the spokespersons.

Oppositionists Slam Report

17. (SBU) Opposition political societies February 11 reacted strongly against the report and, in particular, Al Ajmi's claim that election results would not have been different had the general polling centers been eliminated. Liberal, secular Al Waad political society Secretary General Ibrahim Sharif told the press that the report's assertion regarding the general stations was "a joke." Activist (and BHRS board

member) Abdul Nabi Al Ekri wondered why the report did not address allegations of the government's "political" naturalization of foreign residents presumed to be loyal to the regime during the run-up to the elections. Al Waad member Ibrahim Al Dirazi complained that the report did not adopt a decisive position on whether the elections were free and fair, despite all the violations mentioned. Consultations are reportedly underway among opposition political societies to form a unified position on the report and possibly to file a complaint with Transparency International, with which the Bahrain Transparency Society is affiliated.

Comment

18. (C) There were no surprises in the JEMC report or the comments of Al Ajmi and Al Najjar. They had been signaling since the elections that while there were many technical violations of the election law, they had no evidence of widespread manipulation of the results. It appears, however, that the JEMC adopted a highly legalistic approach to judging proof of government intervention in the election process, and set a very high bar on what constitutes interference. There are allegations that the government used votes cast in the general polling centers to ensure that some pro-government candidates won. In two tightly fought races, votes in the general centers provided the required margin of victory. The JEMC appears to have calculated that the impact of a positive report would be more effective than a negative one in encouraging the government to adopt some of its recommendations for the next elections.

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